

THE LOVES OF MALER NOLTEN¹

by *Raymond Immerwahr*

One of the first principles inculcated in the undergraduate student of literature is that "telling the story" does not constitute critical evaluation. A second principle that has become almost equally self-evident in our time is that a work of literary art must be interpreted either from within itself or in relation to some larger artistic context—the corpus of the writer's creations or perhaps the literary creation of his period—but without reference to the creator's personal experience. Eduard Mörike's novel *Maler Nolten* might well appear to justify both these principles. Its plot strikes the reader as arbitrary and implausible and hardly seems to account for the strange compulsion, the sense of an inner unity, which the novel conveys. The relation of the fictional characters to persons in Mörike's life (Elisabeth to Maria Meyer, Agnes to Luise Rau, the titular hero to Mörike himself) has long been recognized² but has so far thrown little light on the novel as an artistic entity.

The present investigation will violate the first of the abovementioned critical truisms³ and in some measure the second as well. It proposes to interpret the novel by telling the story, and the story to be told will be viewed in reference to personal experience on the part of the young Eduard Mörike. The process of telling this or for that matter any story involves inevitably some interpretation, but the import of this story is drawn from within the novel, illuminated in slight degree by other artistic creations of Mörike but not by purely biographical data. Behind the story we shall discern not a chapter in the biography of Eduard Mörike but a personal myth⁴, not *Wahrheit* in any factual sense but *Dichtung*, a poetic distillate of the emotional life of the young Eduard Mörike. Although our attention will have to remain focused upon the main action of the novel, if it is indeed a unified work of art, the validity of the interpretation to be presented can be tested by its relevance to the episodic materials, the songs, ballads, legends, and the shadow-play, *Der letzte König von Orplid*. This relevance will only be briefly suggested here, but it is hoped that readers familiar with the novel will be able to carry out a more detailed application themselves.

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The title of this paper makes it evident that the interpretation to be offered is especially concerned with the personal objects of the hero's love, with Agnes, the Countess Constanze, and Elisabeth. However, we must first devote some attention to the title of the novel itself. It is the story of a *painter*, of the creative mission, human predicament, and tragic destiny of a young artist. But if we are to consider the work as a *Künstlerroman* we must take note of the fact that there is a second artist in the novel whose destiny is inextricably linked with that of the painter, the actor-poet Larkens. If we look for a presentation of the creative process on the part of the painter, we are bound to be disappointed; the novel scarcely provides more than a description of two pictures created before the start of its action. The creative artistic imagination is presented in terms of the medium with which the creator of the novel himself was familiar—poetry—and its embodiment is Larkens.⁵ It is he who is the artist as artist, whereas Nolten is primarily the human personality with an artistic temperament and a devotion to art. But if the painting of pictures plays no part in the story, the two described at its start are concentrated symbols of the novel's principal themes. The one, a finished canvas, shows a youth being led by a satyr to a water-nymph. The boy shrinks back in fear but at the same time extends his arm in a gesture of irresistible attraction (*Werke und Briefe*, III, 13 f.).⁶ The other, an unfinished sketch, depicts a nocturnal gathering of music-loving spectres and skeletons dancing at the edge of a churchyard to the tones of an organ, which stands in the hollow of a rock by a lively spring ("ein lebhafter Quell"). The organist is a maiden with dark, soulful, dreaming eyes who appears to listen more to the sound of the spring pouring out at her feet than to her own playing. A slumbering youth with closed eyes and a face drawn by suffering leans on the organ, behind which we see Death himself treading the bellows (*ibid.*, pp. 14 ff.). We later learn that the organist is the gypsy Elisabeth. The painting suggests that this is to be the story of a youth who is simultaneously attracted and repelled by erotic love. The organist in the sketch plays the music for a dance of death as she listens to the well-springs of life, but she and her music embody the tragic destiny of the youth, whom we recognize as the hero of the novel. Thus the sketch fuses into one the themes of death, life, daemonic obsession, a tragic fate, and artistic inspiration.

And now to the story. Theobald Nolten, the original creator of these pictures, had been engaged to a young girl of childlike innocence and purity: she is again and again characterized by the nouns *Kind* and *Engel* and the adjectives *rein* and *unschuldig*, and her very name, Agnes, is Greek for "the chaste one."⁷ Nolten had loved her, as he explains, for her "purity, . . . childlike modesty and unlimited devotion" (*äußerste Reinheit der Gesinnung, . . . kindliche Bescheidenheit und eine unbegrenzte Ergebung*) (*ibid.*, p. 42). Larkens especially has built up in his mind an image of

her as "a Christian angel pure as gold" (das goldreine Christengelsbild) (ibid., p. 47).

Under the influence of the gypsy Elisabeth, Agnes had been led to believe that the man she really loved was not the absent Noltén but a cousin of hers named Otto. Illusory and fleeting as this new love proves to have been, it nonetheless has left behind manifestations of sensuality that seem foreign to the angelic creature to whom Noltén was betrothed. Although Agnes has not been unfaithful to Noltén in her actions or even significantly in her emotions, she has outgrown that wishful image of childlike innocence which he had projected upon her. In consequence, at the point where the narrative action commences, he regards the engagement as broken, has discontinued his correspondence with Agnes, and has permitted himself to become passionately involved in a new love for the widowed Countess Constanze Armond.

As a mature, sophisticated, and ardent woman, Constanze is in every sense the antithesis of the childlike Agnes. The fact that she virtually disappears from the plot a little more than midway through the novel is something of a problem to the critic and suggests that the author had difficulty integrating her into the work. We may note here that there are three women in Noltén's life, not to mention the fourth object of his love to which he briefly maintains an exclusive loyalty, art. But within the time directly covered by the narrative, there is just one woman whom Noltén loves passionately and spontaneously, without external compulsion or prompting, Constanze Armond. While still an adolescent he had thought he loved the child Agnes, and under the influence of his friend Larkens, Noltén will try to return to this adolescent love in his maturity. Even earlier, while still a boy, Noltén had been overcome by a passion for the gypsy girl Elisabeth, the portrait of whose mother had been an image dominating the depths of his being since earliest childhood.⁸ Elisabeth has held Noltén in bondage, in a sense even before birth, in the love of his uncle for her mother, Loskine, and this bondage is to extend beyond Noltén's death in the vision of the blind boy Henni at the end of the novel. But in spite of the obsessive spell cast upon Noltén first by the image of her mother and then by Elisabeth herself, during the time covered by the direct narrative Elisabeth functions in the plot as the personification of a daemonic destiny, and as such she is the object, not of Noltén's love, but of his intense hatred. Only once, at their last encounter in life, does he show even fleeting sympathy for her (ibid., p. 374).

If we now examine the plot of this novel as a mythic projection of subjective personal experience, it is clear and has long been recognized that Agnes reflects Mörike's image of the fiancée he never married, Luise Rau, blended with that of his boyhood love, Klärchen Neuffer.⁹ So there is reason to infer that Mörike had at least an intuitive awareness that he

was trying to love the pastor's daughter Luise as though she were the innocent child he had loved in his cousin Klärchen. He is also likely to have felt that the obsessive passion he had experienced as a student for the epileptic vagrant Maria Meyer had intervened between his loves for Klärchen and Luise, obstructing his return to the love of an image of childhood which he had projected first upon Klärchen and then unsuccessfully attempted to project upon Luise. The plot of the novel, or rather that part in it which is most obviously rooted in the author's personal experience, reflects the way in which erotic passion—an experience which Mörike intimately associated with destiny and death—intervened to make it impossible for him to realize a profound yearning for emotional satisfaction in an image of childlike innocence and purity. As the intervening experience of an overwhelming erotic passion prevented the mature Mörike from "returning" in his love of Luise to the earlier love of a boyhood ideal in Klärchen, so the effort of the mature artist Nolten to return to the object of his boyhood love, Agnes, is frustrated by Elisabeth, the personification of obsessive passion, destiny, and the daemonic sources of the creative imagination.¹⁰

What has so far been presented, however, is only a fragmentary mythic interpretation, for it fails to take into account precisely that woman who is the sole object of a spontaneous erotic passion during Nolten's maturity, Constanze Armond, and it has also ignored the equally important role of the friend who is responsible for Nolten's return to Agnes, the poet and actor Larkens. For these two characters there are no clear biographical prototypes, and there is considerable justification for the tendency of the critical literature to regard them as embodiments of literary and cultural traditions. Whatever may be her origin, Constanze objectifies an ideal of Mörike's maturity which functions in the first half of the novel as a counterpoise to the boyhood ideal of innocence. She is a mature and sophisticated woman who can become the object of an erotic love which is indeed passionate but is not of itself daemonically consuming. In this last respect it is entirely unlike the feelings of Nolten for Elisabeth, Mörike's love for Maria Meyer, or the lyric image of Maria Meyer, Peregrina, as it was projected by Mörike in actuality and by Larkens within the novel. Constanze might then be regarded as the projection of an ideal combining emotional maturity and cultural sophistication, an ideal which seems momentarily within reach but is then removed by intervening forces, ultimately to be destroyed by the daemonic power embodied in Elisabeth. The remoteness of this ideal in the mythic imagination of the young Mörike is reflected in the aristocratic level of society to which Constanze belongs and the court circles in which she moves, a milieu with which Mörike had no direct personal contact. Although the present investigation is focused on the original version of the novel, it is worth noting that in the second version,

which Mörike began late in life but never completed, the general cultural sophistication of Constanze is reinforced by her attachment to the art of the Rococo, which she particularly associates with a charming little hunting lodge she had frequented in childhood (*Werke und Briefe*, IV, 31 f.). Her brother speaks mockingly of her "Zärtlichkeit für Alles, was nur *du siècle passe* sei, als da wären alte Fürstenschlösser, uralte Eichenschränke, chinesische Vasen und dergleichen" (ibid., p. 35.).

It is not essential to the argument of this paper that every major character or episode in the novel be accounted for in terms of Eduard Mörike's biography. Constanze is clearly the product of cultural and literary traditions to a much greater degree than Agnes and Elisabeth, perhaps entirely so. Whatever its origins, the ideal of a mature erotic love that need not connote consuming guilt or death might be expected to occupy a region of Mörike's imagination well removed from the strict and strait Lutheran environment in which he had grown up as a descendant of a line of pastors, as the cadet of a Lutheran academy, and as a student of theology. Such an ideal was inconceivable for the sensitive, impressionable and intensely loyal youth in the academy at Urach (the scene of his love for Klärchen), and it was all the more so in Mörike's Swabian country vicarages after the soul-shattering experience with Maria Meyer that had intervened during his theological studies in Tübingen. However, there are a few poems suggesting that at one brief period in a very different environment, Mörike was able to glimpse an eroticism uncontaminated by associations of guilt or spiritual death. These poems, "Josephine," "Frage und Antwort," "Nimmersatte Liebe," and "Liebesvorzeichen," are the first artistic expressions of an unabashed erotic attraction in Mörike's work. They provide a foretaste of an important component of his later lyric creation, in which a playful eroticism is associated with the ancient Anacreontic poets, with the higher cultural sphere of Greek and Latin poetic forms generally, and with that "classical clarity" (of German Classicism) which Gerhard Storz mentions in connection with the Countess Constanze.¹¹

These poems were conceived during a sojourn in the Catholic village of Scheer, an environment removed from the scenes of the young vicar's desperate struggle for a living Christian faith,¹² and they appear to have been inspired by an acquaintance with a Catholic girl.¹³ This is not to suggest that the scarcely identified "girl of Scheer" need be regarded as a biographical prototype of Constanze comparable to Maria Meyer as a prototype of Elisabeth-Peregrina or to Klärchen Neuffer and Luise Rau as prototypes of Agnes. But it is interesting to observe how the poem "Josephine" associates erotic emotion with a keen aesthetic delight in the Catholic ritual. Immediately after the celebration of the Mass, the poet hears the girl's voice singing in the choir of the church and steps up behind her in the choir-loft:

Hier konnt ich denn in unschuldsvoller Lust
Mit leiser Hand ihr festlich Kleid berühren....¹⁴

When Mörike finally brought himself to marry more than two decades later, his bride was a Catholic, and a telepathic experience associated with the performance of a Catholic ritual served as an augury encouraging him to contemplate the marriage.¹⁵ The name given the Catholic girl in this poem, Josephine, also happens to be the middle name of the Countess Constanze in *Maler Nolten*. We learn this when she tells Nolten of a dream in which the organist steps out of his painting and comes to tell her, "*Constanze Josephine Armond wird auch bald die Orgel mit uns spielen*" (*Werke und Briefe*, III, 70, italics in source). This name,¹⁶ which the Countess shares with the poetic object of "innocent desire" during a Catholic village mass, suggests that at one remove from his own religious, cultural, and social environment it was possible for Mörike to conceive of an essentially innocent passion. This is the common mythic significance of the two Josephines in Mörike's subjective experience.

The Countess Armond is not the only major character in *Maler Nolten* without a clearly identifiable biographical prototype. The other one is Nolten's friend Larkens. It is scarcely worth speculating to what extent he may have been inspired by some mercurial and unstable friend of Mörike's youth, such as Rudolf Lohbauer or Friedrich Wilhelm Waiblinger.¹⁷ The question of his literary prototypes in characters of Jean Paul Richter, Brentano, and E.T.A. Hoffmann and his association with Romantic irony¹⁸ are interesting enough in themselves but do not cast much light on his mythic function in the novel. What is more important is that he and Nolten together constitute a typically Romantic "complementary pair,"¹⁹ that they are projections of two different aspects of Mörike himself.²⁰ This dual reflection of Mörike's own personality in the novel may have originated in a desire on the author's part to present a true *Künstlerroman*, concerned not merely with a painter's life and with the symbolic significance of a few of his works but with the process of artistic creation itself as the poet Mörike had experienced it. For within the novel Larkens is the creator of the poems most closely associated with the plot, those inspired by Elisabeth and by Agnes, and with Nolten he is joint creator of the shadow play *Der letzte König von Orplid*. Most important of all, Larkens is the recreator, the artistic restorer or "forger," of the image of Agnes as a pure and innocent child in the imagination of Nolten. Larkens paradoxically combines Romantic irony and a kind of Byronic satiety with passion on the one hand with the devotion to an evangelical Christian ideal of love which Nolten himself has outgrown. One can hardly imagine one of Larkens's literary prototypes in Brentano or Hoffmann loving, even vicariously, an image of childlike innocence. As an individual character

Larkens is a synthesis of Romantic-ironic sophistication with that yearning for pristine innocence and spontaneity which is both an underlying current of Romanticism and the subject of Schiller's essay *Über naive und sentimentalische Dichtung*. He combines all those environmental and cultural influences upon Mörike which had become too much a part of his life to be cast off but which he instinctively felt to be extraneous to his true, inmost self. These include such peripheral matters as political dissatisfaction and court intrigue, but more centrally they involve the conflict between the Romantic and the Classical, the sentimental and the naive. For all Larkens' similarity to Romantic literary figures, it is not so much Romanticism itself that he represents as the yearning of the sentimental Romantic for naive and Classicist values.²¹ In his own way and in his own good time Mörike himself was to find his way back to those same values, but at the stage of his development reflected in this novel, the polarity of the Romantic and the Classical belonged to those outer layers of Mörike's experience which were complicating and impeding his development. Noltén, on the other hand, is an ideal embodiment of what the author of the novel instinctively recognized as the inner core of his artistic personality. For Noltén—or Mörike—to attain personal fulfilment, he would have to cast aside everything extraneous to this core. The cultural issues and ethical ideals represented by Larkens, which impinge, so to speak, on Noltén from the outside and from above, unwittingly join forces with the consuming irrational drives embodied in Elisabeth that are forcing their way up from the depths of the unconscious, and together they bring about Noltén's destruction. Mörike himself, after years of struggle, was finally able to clarify his relationship to the issues and dictates represented by Larkens and in so doing to defend his identity against the irrational substratum of his experience. Undoubtedly the creation of this novel itself contributed to his success in maintaining a precarious balance for the rest of his natural life.²²

When we turn to Larkens' function in the plot, we observe that he is responsible for two successive deflections of Noltén's path in the middle of the novel. The production of his shadow-play, *Der letzte König von Orplid*, together with the letters of Agnes to Noltén—in reply to Larkens' forgeries—which Larkens contrives to have discovered by Constanze immediately afterwards (*Werke und Briefe*, III, 156, 163) lead to the rupture of the friendship between the Countess and Noltén and the imprisonment of both him and Larkens on political charges associated with the play. There follows a brief period in which Noltén devotes himself exclusively to his art, fore-swearing every other love and happiness. This decision is based on the deepest conviction and the clearest understanding of his mission in life:

Sieh, das Gefühl, wovon ich rede, lag in der letzten Zeit schon beinahe reif in mir; ich kann nicht sagen, daß es die Folge langer Überlegung sey, doch ruht es auf dem

klarsten und nüchternsten Bewußtseyn und ist so wahr als ich nur selber wirklich bin. Es hat sich mir in diesen Tagen die Gestalt meiner Vergangenheit, mein inneres und äußeres Geschick, von selber wie im Spiegel aufgedrungen und es war das Erstmal, daß mir die Bedeutung meines Lebens, von seinen ersten Anfängen an, so unzweideutig vor Augen lag (*ibid.*, p. 226).

For a brief moment Nolten has caught sight of his life's true direction. He feels as if a blindfold has been removed from his eyes, allowing him to recognize the movement of the sphere on which he has been attempting to direct the chariot of his destiny.

Nichts bleibt mir übrig, als die Kunst, aber ganz erfahr' ich nun auch ihren heiligen Werth. Nachdem so lange ein fremdes Feuer mein Inneres durchtobt und mich von Grunde aus gereinigt hat, ist es tief still in mir geworden, und langsam spannen alle meine Kräfte sich an, in feierlicher Erwartung der Dinge, die nun kommen sollen. Eine neue Epoche ist für mich angebrochen, und, so Gott will, wird die Welt die Früchte bald erleben....Es bleibt mir nichts zu wünschen übrig, da ich das Allgenügende der Kunst und jene hohe Einsamkeit empfunden, worin ihr Jünger sich für immerdar versenken muß. Ich habe der Welt entsagt....Auf diese Resignation hat jede meiner Prüfungen hingedeutet, dieß war der Fingerzeig meines ganzen bisherigen Lebens; es wird mich von nun an nichts mehr irre machen (*ibid.*, pp. 227 f.).

It may be said that Mörike himself remained true to this insight, sacrificing his love for Luise Rau and eventually even his pastoral vocation. Nolten, on the other hand, does not; he allows Larkens to turn him aside from the true course of his life.

Of the numerous facets of the imagination which Larkens embodies, the one which is crucial at this turning-point of the plot is his Protestant Christian ideal of purity. After the man Nolten has broken off his correspondence with Agnes because she could not remain the immaculate child he had loved in boyhood and because he had himself advanced to a more adult vision of love, Larkens intervenes to turn him back to the idyllic realm of Neuburg, the home of Agnes. He has tried this first by using Elisabeth, in the New Year's Eve mask of a night-watchman, to evoke the image of the pure, innocent child dreaming of her absent and perhaps unfaithful lover (*ibid.*, pp. 38 ff.). After the failure of this ruse, Larkens has revived the expired love of Nolten for Agnes in the form of a poetic illusion, forging new love letters from Nolten to which Agnes replies. It is these letters—a delusion on her part in response to a forgery of Nolten's love—that Larkens has left with Constanze. Not satisfied merely with intervening between Nolten and Constanze, Larkens is determined to drive Nolten back to Agnes, to make him accept the forgery as though it were real. When simple persuasion fails, Larkens personally departs from Nolten but leaves behind the forged correspondence with his own letter persuading him to return to the ideal of heavenly innocence: "Setze das Mädchen in seine alten Rechte wieder ein. Du findest auf der Welt nichts Himmlischeres, als die Seele dieses Kindes ist" (*ibid.*, p. 239). Indeed,

Larkens has carried the forgery so far as to confront Noltén with the alternative of either accepting it or destroying Agnes's happiness and her very life.

Wirst Du bald kommen? wirst Du nicht?—Wag' es sie zu betrügen! Den hellen süßen Sommertag dieser schuldlosen Seele mit Einem verzweifelten Streiche hinzustürzen in eine dumpfe Nacht, wehe! das wimmernde Geschöpf! Thu's, und erlebe, daß ich in wenig Monden, ein einsamer Wallfahrer, auf des Mädchens Grabhügel die kraftlose Posse, das Nichts unsrer Freundschaft, und die zerschlagene Hoffnung beweine, daß mein elendes Leben, kurz eh ich's ende, doch wenigstens noch so viel nutz seyn möchte, zwei gute Menschen glücklich zu machen (*ibid.*, p. 241).

At a moment when his reading of the letters is interrupted and he is still wavering, Noltén finds himself before a little etching depicting a kneeling figure, "unten stehn ein paar fromme Verse, die er in frühster Jugend manchmal im Munde seiner verstorbenen Mutter gehört zu haben sich sogleich erinnert." He is overwhelmed by recollections of childhood with all their associated anguish and ecstasy.

Die Vergangenheit steht vor ihm, Agnes schwebt heran, ein Schauer ihres Wesens berührt ihn, er fühlt, daß das Unmögliche möglich, daß Altes neu werden könne.

Dieß sind Augenblicke, wo der Mensch willig darauf verzichtet, sich selber zu begreifen, sich mit den bekannten Gesetzen seines bisherigen Seyns und Empfindens übereinstimmend zu vergleichen; man überläßt sich getrost dem göttlichen Elemente, das uns trägt, und ist gewiß, man werde wohlbehalten an ein bestimmtes Ziel gelangen (*ibid.*, p. 245).

Either we are to take the author at his word and accept his emphasis on the hero's self-delusion, or we are to share Noltén's feeling that he is yielding to a divinely directed destiny. But the ending of the novel will make it clear enough what goal Noltén will reach and how well preserved he is to be on his arrival there! This attempt of his to act without regard for all the clearly recognized "laws of his previous being and feeling" is a tragic error and must end in catastrophe.

When Noltén does return to Agnes, he finds that she is no longer simply the innocent child he had known as a boy. The blond hair that he had taken as a token of her angelic purity has changed to a chestnut brown. Moreover, her personality has been invaded by an element of experience that had been foreign to her, one which Noltén cannot easily reconcile with his image of untroubled childlike innocence—by music.

Es gibt unschuldige Kleinigkeiten, die mit unserm Begriffe von einer Person, wenn er nur einigermaßen etwas Idealisches hat, schlechterdings zu streiten scheinen, ja ihn beinahe verletzen. Sogleich ward Noltén von dieser Empfindung berührt, von einer unangenehmen, wenn man will....(*ibid.*, p. 272).

This is the way he reacts when he hears her whistling and learns that she can now sing. The unpleasant feeling nonetheless has a certain piquancy and fascination. He looks forward to hearing her sing with a mixture of dread and feverish curiosity. Her hesitation and the songs she finally does

sing for him—one of a fleeting quarrel between lovers, another of the transience of love and fidelity (*ibid.*, pp. 286 ff.)—point to the strain inherent in this attempt at restoring a bygone relationship between two lovers who have ceased to be the same persons as had loved each other before. What is disturbing about Agnes's new musical accomplishment is the dangerous depths Nolten associates with music that have now opened up in her soul. They are a sign that she is no longer sheltered from the daemonic realm embodied in Elisabeth, the organist of Death.²³ In the consciousness of Agnes the object of anxiety is Elisabeth's prophecy that she and Nolten are not destined to wed and the warning not to reveal this prophecy until a year has passed. The foreboding of an early death steadily grows in Agnes as she awaits the elapse of this term.

Nolten, on the other hand, attempts to adjust to the changes in Agnes by accommodating his original image of her to suit his own present state of emotional development. Rather than simply restoring the childhood love, he would now synthesize it with the sensuality that has entered her personality and his, loving Agnes simultaneously as an angelic child and as a desirable young woman. This new ideal is epitomized in Larkens' cycle of poems "An L.," which Agnes sees in her insanity near the end of the novel (*ibid.*, pp. 389 ff.). They consist of five sonnets and a concluding poem of five quatrains, "In der Char-Woche." The third and fourth sonnets are concerned with a miraculous union of temporal and eternal love, erotic desire, and Christian faith. In the third poem ("Wenn ich, von deinem Anschau tief gestillt"), the vital springs of temporal destiny seem united for a moment with the timeless song of the stars. The following sonnet acknowledges that the eternity of love is a "heavenly sweet illusion" but insists that love, like the eagle, must venture the flight into eternity. This cycle is immediately followed by another insert, the legend attached to the Spring of St. Alexis which is related by the blind boy Henni: it had witnessed the miraculous refutation of a Christian saint's doubt in the heavenly purity of his own earthly love (*ibid.*, pp. 392 ff.). The two central poems of the cycle and the legend are variants on a common theme which is refuted by the concurrent developments in the action of the novel: the validity of a sensual love for an angelic being, the bridging of the gap between man's temporal destiny and eternity, the divine sanction of sexual love. This is precisely the miracle which Nolten had attempted to accomplish in his return to Agnes.²⁴

Agnes's lapse into incurable insanity is evidence of her own inability to achieve the synthesis to which Nolten aspires. It is precipitated by the death of Larkens, under the impact of which Nolten reveals to her the latter's forgery of the letters and his own recent love for Constanze. In the derangement resulting from these disclosures, Agnes suffers what in other eyes is a delusion but is essentially an insight into the true state

of affairs: her real lover is the "Nolten" who wrote these letters, and the other Nolten now with her is an imposter, the lover of Constanze posing as Agnes's own fiancé. The underlying identity of the conflict in Agnes's soul with the division between Nolten and Larkens as we know them is revealed in the two hymns she sings to the accompaniment of Henni on the eve of her death (*ibid.*, pp. 400 ff.): the medieval Latin hymn "Jesu, benigne!" expresses a passionate yearning to love Christ and a spiritual frigidity which has frustrated that yearning. "Eine Liebe kenn' ich, die ist treu" gives vent to the agony of a heart which feels its love for the Saviour crowded out by sinful lust. There is no resolution for Agnes but her drowning in the Spring of St. Alexis, no resolution for Nolten but the fulfilment of the tragic destiny witnessed in the vision of the blind boy. Drawn on by wild organ-like tones—produced by a storm but resembling the wild songs of Elisabeth in her fits of insanity—Nolten runs to the chapel and drops dead before the organ. When the shade of Elisabeth emerges from the darkness by the side of the organ, his shade reluctantly follows hers out across the threshold. His soul has been claimed in death by the organist of his painting. The concluding sentence of the novel tells us that the Countess Constanze Armond "survived these sad destinies by only a few months" (*ibid.*, p. 414).

To sum up, *Maler Nolten* is the tragic story of a young artist who briefly seems on the verge of personal fulfilment in an image of a mature passionate love untainted by feelings of guilt and associated with aristocratic cultural and social values. This image is destroyed by the intervention of his friend and alter ego, who embodies the poetic yearnings of Romanticism for naive simplicity together with the religious and ethical ideals of German Protestantism. The resultant effort of the artist to return to an abandoned boyhood ideal of childlike simplicity and angelic innocence is doomed to failure because the embodiment of that ideal has fallen prey to the daemonic destiny which controls the artist himself and is, indeed, the source of his artistic inspiration. This destiny is the underlying predicament of man's transitory existence, the inevitability of involvement in life and death, in desire and passion. The image of innocence cannot be restored and lapses into insanity and death; the Romantic imagination which had evoked the image destroys itself; the artist for whom it has been evoked is claimed in death by his inexorable destiny.

This mythic interpretation reveals not only the meaningful unity of the novel's plot but also the relevance of the various episodic inserts: the shadow-play, the legends, and the cycles of poems, those we may regard as originally written for this novel as well as those which were conceived earlier out of a common substratum of subjective experience. The shadow-play with its text by Larkens and its images by Nolten presents the conflict between the timelessness embodied in the highest ideals of art and culture

and the temporal predicament of the artistic imagination that is captive in time.²⁵ An island realm of eternal aesthetic values, Orplid, is transgressed by the vulgarity, corruption, and falsity of temporal existence, and the exponent of those values, King Ulmon, yearns for his release back into eternity. Both within the shadow-play and in the main action of the novel, the comic figure of the barber posing as artist, Sigismund Wispel—not by chance the boon companion of a printer—grotesquely embodies the corruption, falsification, and pretense that parasitically attach themselves to art as it is communicated to a decadent and tasteless society. Larkens' choice of Wispel and his friends as companions for the last weeks of his life and Mörike's lifelong attachment to this comic figure suggest that he represents yet a third facet of the artist's destiny, in addition to those embodied in Nolten and Larkens. This is the ever-present danger of corruption inherent in communication with the public: Wispel is almost a Biedermeier precursor of Felix Krull.

In the *Peregrina* poems (ibid., pp. 362 ff.) the experience of consuming erotic passion that figures so negatively in Elisabeth, while still ominously destructive, is nevertheless recognized as innocent and human and the price of its rejection is acknowledged. The ballad of the "Feuerreiter" (ibid., pp. 36 f.) and the legend and songs of Jung Volker (ibid., pp. 295 ff.) present the theme of daemonic intensity from two aspects: the one as a consuming fire, the other as a vital force of nature in conflict with the ideal of spiritual purity but operating according to its own laws. There is also an interesting difference in perspective between the prose narrative of the Jung Volker legend and the two songs. In the narrative Jung Volker is a robber captain and huntsman who kills a white stag sacred to the Virgin Mary and dedicates a chapel to her in penance for this sin. But in the songs he presents himself as an unrepentant embodiment of pagan energy, the son of a wild young girl by the Wind, to whom she has yielded herself as mistress. The second of these songs is sung by a character of the novel, the sculptor Raymund, who is himself an unabashed exponent of pagan eroticism.

Our mythic interpretation of the plot of *Maler Nolten* suggests a hypothetical reconstruction of Mörike's mythic view of his own subjective experience at the time he created it. He aspired for self-realization both in the creation of literary art and in an erotic love unburdened by feelings of guilt. These aspirations were threatened from two directions, by his existential predicament as a human being and by the ideals of German Protestantism in which he had been educated and to which he was still committed as a Swabian village vicar. An artist with timeless ideals of beauty, he found himself involuntarily plunged into a temporal existence involving passion and guilt and inexorably moving toward death. This predicament of transience, passion, guilt, and death had come to be embodied for him in the figure of Maria Meyer. Indeed, he was compelled

to recognize this predicament as the source of his artistic inspiration. His family background, education, and vocational commitment demanded that any object of his love must be endowed with angelic innocence and purity. Fulfilment of his emotional needs as a human being had therefore to be sought in some other and higher cultural milieu than the Swabian Protestant family tradition, the religious academy, theological seminar, and vicarage to which his personal experience had been largely confined. He had to seek this fulfilment either from the cultural ideals of German Classicism and its antecedents in Greek and Roman antiquity or from his limited contacts with Catholic ritual and the Baroque tradition in German Catholicism. During his boyhood years at the Lutheran academy in Urach he had become enamoured of a cousin upon whom he could project his childhood ideal of purity. Since then he had experienced first the consuming, soul-shattering passion for Maria Meyer and then a brief glimpse of "unschuldsvolle Lust" in a Catholic village. There now appeared an opportunity to project the boyhood ideal of angelic innocence and childlike naiveté upon a second girl, the pastor's daughter Luise Rau, through whom he hoped somehow to achieve a harmonious synthesis of erotic passion and Christian spiritual innocence. Deep within his consciousness he knew that this ideal was impossible, a forgery of his poetic imagination, but for a time—precisely the period during which *Maler Nolten* was written—he allowed this poetic imagination and the religious and ethical ideals of his boyhood to win out over his own judgment. While he was still struggling to deceive himself in his personal life, in the creation of this novel he objectified his realization that he was pursuing an insane ideal, that the attempt to consummate it was doomed to failure, and that the path he must ultimately follow was his destiny as a poetic artist inspired by the conflict between timeless ideals of beauty and the human predicament of mutability and consuming passion. With his real home in the realm of Orplid, he was condemned to participate in a Dance of Death to the mingled tones of the springs of life and the fateful gypsy organist.

NOTES

1. A short preliminary version of this paper was read at the Foreign Language Conference of the University of Kentucky, Lexington, in April, 1968.

2. Cf. Harry Maync, *Eduard Mörike*, 2. Auflage (Stuttgart, Berlin, 1913), pp. 72 ff., 113 ff., and 142.

3. It is applied to this novel by Gerhard Storz: "Eine Inhaltsangabe von Mörikes Roman, die sich auf die pragmatischen Handlungselemente beschränken wollte, wäre in wenigen Sätzen zu geben, aber sie würde auch das Wesentliche des Werkes übergehen." *Eduard Mörike* (Stuttgart, 1967), p. 190. Since writing this paper I have found a detailed and lucid summation of the plot of *Maler Nolten* in Helga Slessarev, *Eduard Mörike* (New York, 1970), pp. 91-110. She relates the action of the novel to Mörike's biography,

his psychological interests, and to literary tradition, but does not recognize a central thematic function in the forgery of the love letters.

4. The friend to whose memory this volume is dedicated once remarked in conversation that people generally tend to interpret their personal experiences and contacts in the form of myths. The present paper is indebted in part to the thought which this statement set in motion.

5. On the relation of Larkens to Nolten, cf. Jeffrey L. Sammons, "Fate and Psychology: Another Look at Mörike's *Maler Nolten*," in J. L. Sammons and Ernst Schürer, eds., *Lebendige Form: Interpretationen zur deutschen Literatur, Festschrift für Heinrich E. K. Henel* (München, 1970), pp. 214 ff. Sammons' article appeared between the reading of the preliminary oral version of this paper and the preparation of the present revision. Sammons' findings agree with those of this paper at certain points, e.g., "Nolten does not love Agnes, but believes that he should. Larkens does love Agnes, or, rather, his projection of her . . ." (p. 219), and "Elisabeth . . . is a projection of Mörike's preoccupation with passion and its lethal magnetism" (p. 222). However, Sammons finds that the "thematic considerations of *Maler Nolten*, which arise out of Mörike's most private depths, are internalized" to a remarkably small degree "in any of the characters, Nolten included. Instead, the interactions of persons take on a surface logic of their own and edge toward a kind of psychological realism" (p. 226). Mörike's psychological realism has been observed in the portrayal of the individual characters of this novel by nearly every previous critic. The present paper would suggest that the thematic considerations of *Maler Nolten*, which it sees somewhat differently from Sammons, are reflected primarily in the plot, which is the projection of a structure in depth psychology, like a folk tale or, more precisely, a myth, as understood by modern psychology. If this approach should be essentially correct, qualified psychologists may be able to work it out in detail; but it is surely the structure of the whole rather than the portrayal of individual characters that a psychological approach can most significantly illuminate. Some valuable suggestions on Mörike from the perspective of modern depth psychology are to be found in Liselotte Dieckmann, "Mörike's Presentation of the Creative Process," *JEGP*, LIII (1954), 291-305.

6. Page references in the text are to Eduard Mörike, *Werke und Briefe*, ed. Herbert Meyer (Stuttgart, 1967 ff.). The original version of the novel, to which reference is generally made, is in Volume III of this edition, the revised version in Volume IV.

7. On purity as a life-long theme of Mörike's creation, cf. the unpublished dissertation of Harriett P. O'Swald, *Die Idee der Reinheit im Werk von Eduard Mörike*, University of Washington, 1969.

8. Heinrich Reinhardt, *Mörike und sein Roman "Maler Nolten"*, finds that in this image of Elisabeth in her mother's portrait, "Wir sind ganz in die romantische Atmosphäre versetzt, wo die Geliebte Verkörperung eines Traumes, Schöpfung der eigenen Seele, Ausfluß ihrer innersten Triebe ist" ("Wege zur Dichtung," Band IX [Horgen-Zürich, Leipzig, 1930], p. 79). But in the context of Nolten's relation to Elisabeth herself it appears that the common psychological basis of this theme in Mörike and his precursors in German Romanticism, the roots of adolescent sexual emotion in the psychological experience of infancy and early childhood, is more clearly evident here than in such novels as Tieck's *Franz Sternbalds Wanderungen*, for example.

9. According to Maync (op. cit., p. 82), she inspired the poem "Wo find' ich Trost?" which is sung by Agnes in the novel (III, 401). As a kind of rival to Maria Meyer in Mörike's emotions under the initial impact of the latter, Klärchen stood in a relation more closely analogous to that of Agnes to Elisabeth than is the case with Luise. Cf. also Reinhardt, op. cit., p. 66.

10. The name Agnes was earlier applied to Peregrina, the lyric projection of Maria Meyer corresponding to Elisabeth in the prose narrative. A much longer earlier version of the poem to Peregrina entitled "Warnung" in the novel (III, 363) was entitled "Agnes, die Nonne." Another poem in the Peregrina cycle, "Die Hochzeit" (p. 362), bears the title "Agnesens Hochzeit" in an earlier manuscript version. Cf. Maync, p. 74. The transfer of the name to a character so different as Agnes in the novel is not incongruous when we recall that Mörike originally believed in the innocence and purity of Maria Meyer, a theme which is never quite obliterated from the Peregrina poems.

11. Op. cit., p. 146. Storz also points out here the resemblance of the Countess to characters in *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* and *Die Wahlverwandtschaften*. In addition to these, Reinhardt mentions *Iphigenie* and *Tasso* (op. cit., pp. 83 ff.). The novel was conceived at a time when Mörike was engrossed in the works of Goethe and in the Goethe-Schiller correspondence; cf. Maync, p. 116.

12. On this struggle and its reflection in the songs sung by Agnes at the end of the novel (pp. 400 ff.), cf. Immerwahr, "Apocalyptic Trumpets: The Inception of *Mozart auf der Reise nach Prag*," *PMLA*, LXX (1955), 396 ff.

13. Cf. Maync, op. cit., pp. 104 f. and Storz, op. cit., pp. 120 ff.

14. Eduard Mörike, *Sämtliche Werke*, ed. Herbert G. Göpfert (München, 1954), p. 41.

15. Cf. Maync, op. cit., pp. 283 f. For economic reasons the marriage could not take place until several years after this event.

16. According to Maync (op. cit., p. 104) it was the name of the Catholic girl in Scheer.

17. Cf. Maync, op. cit., p. 106. Waiblinger died in 1830; Mörike subsequently published some of his poems. A third friend, Ludwig Bauer, must also be mentioned; although of a happy and stable disposition, he had shared with Mörike in the conception of the Orplid myth.

18. Cf. Reinhardt, op. cit., pp. 41 ff.

19. Sammons, op. cit., p. 216.

20. Reinhardt, op. cit., pp. 43 f. Benno von Wiese, *Eduard Mörike* (Tübingen, Stuttgart, 1950), says, "In ihm steckt so etwas wie ein Doppelgänger Mörikes" (p. 193; cf. also p. 201).

21. Cf. Reinhardt, op. cit., pp. 50 ff.

22. Cf. Storz, op. cit., pp. 160 f.

23. Cf. the melancholy and uncanny singing of Elisabeth at the time of Noltens' first encounter with her in boyhood (ibid., pp. 193 f.). On the daemonic personal associations of music for Mörike, cf. Immerwahr, op. cit., pp. 390-407.

24. Cf. Herbert Meyer, "Mörikes Legende vom Alexisbrunnen," *DVLG*, XXVI (1952), 255-67. Meyer refutes the common assumption that this legend has no particular relevance to the novel by comparing it with its probable source in Goethe and noting that Mörike departs from the tradition of this and other Saints' Legends by presenting earthly love in harmony with religious devotion. Although I am in agreement with Meyer's evaluation of Mörike's version of the Alexis legend and his argument that its conciliatory outcome softens the impact of the tragic ending of the novel, it seems to me that there is a certain irony in its bearing upon the novel's plot.

25. Cf. Wolfgang Taraba, "Die Rolle der 'Zeit' und des 'Schicksals' in Eduard Mörikes 'Maler Noltens,'" *Euphorion*, L (1956), 405-27.